

Tree of knowledge

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Generations Avoid Ancient Curse in Tarkiln

By JANICE NEUBAUER



Probably the last painted sign used to mark Tree of Knowledge site. Painted by Fanny Clark of South Duxbury. Known to have been used in 1970's.

For over 150 years, Tarkiln and those who live in this small West Duxbury neighborhood may well have been protected from dire happenings because those who

came before them have been careful to mark the spot where the Tree of Knowledge once stood. Local legend insists this is necessary to avert "terrible blight and affliction."

A granite tablet, placed by the committee on markers when the town celebrated its tercentenary in 1937, is the present manifestation of the many signs that have followed the tradition. In a news release at the time, Dr. Reuben Peterson, chairman of the Sub-committee on Markers, was quick to deny that the members of the Tercentenary Committee were in any way superstitious but added "it is just as well to be on the safe side" and that the site would be marked in the hope that "the curse will be averted for the next 300 years."

In a newspaper interview printed in the Boston Herald in 1923 when the sign was in jeopardy because of a road project, Harry Randall, a life resident of Tarkiln and a protector of the sign for 30 years as his father was before him, said "Folks in these parts think a lot of that sign. That spot has been marked longer than anybody can remember. Back in the days of Miles Standish there used to be a big oak tree at that corner where the 'Massachusetts Path' met the 'Duxbury Road'. At that time there was no post to Duxbury, so the runner between the Massachusetts Bay Colony and Plymouth used to leave any messages and letters intended for Duxbury folk at this tree. The custom continued, and soon this oak began to be known far and wide as the Tree of Knowledge, because from there all information was dispensed and gathered."

The tree, which served as a depository for the mail from early Colonial days until the coming of the railroad in 1845, stood at the junction of the Massachusetts Bay Path (later to become the old route 3) and the road

running through Tinkertown. The Massachusetts Bay path was the westerly one of the 2 King's Highways laid out in 1685 soon after Plymouth and the Massachusetts colonies were united. The other King's Highway led to Scituate and the other shore towns. The Duxbury road (through Tinkertown) was laid out in 1763.

The "runners" carried letters and messages in packets, leaving them at designated spots such as Duxbury's well-known oak tree. Old letters, diaries and reference mail were carried in this way. Paper was hard to come by, of a coarse texture and expensive, too valuable to be wasted on envelopes. The paper was folded to form its own envelope and sometimes sealed by was. As the settlements spread and families were separated, one can imagine the vital importance of this "mail" delivery, unreliable and chancy as it was. The tree became known

by all in Duxbury and its environs as the Tree of Knowledge. The name bespeaks the significance of this written communication in an era without radio, telephone, telegraph or television, and only a few newspapers. It also suggests a perception that as the temporary repository of messages, letters, tracts, personal thoughts and feelings, the tree has absorbed all of these in its being by some strange process of osmosis.

The first post office in Plymouth was established May 12, 1775, by the Provincial Congress and William Watson was appointed postmaster, with Timothy Goodwin and Joseph Howland as joint post riders. In June of that year, the mounted mail carriers made regular trips between Plymouth and Boston, possible the first government-sponsored rural delivery. The riders from Duxbury who then distributed it had to be paid by "those most interested."

As the volume of mail grew heavier, a mail box was nailed on the tree for the convenience of the early mounted riders and to protect the packets. It was left unlocked and unguarded until some local resident made the trip out from the village.

In 1796, stage coaches replaced the post riders. Three times a week, the coach pulled by 4 strong horses left Boston at 5 am. Its route was Dorchester, Quincy, Weymouth Landing, West Scituate, Hanover, Pembroke, West Duxbury and Plymouth. It began its return route at 2 pm. It carried 2 pouches, one for through mail, the other for local.

The coaches ran until the railroad became a more efficient means of carrying the mail in 1845. The oak and its box no longer served the community as an

official mail drop, although tradition has it that lovers used it to leave messages and arrange clandestine appointments. One can also imagine children leaving messages for their playmates.

Years passed and the tree lost some heavy limbs to various storms until, finally, according to information passed down through the generations, it was struck by lightning during a storm of great magnitude.

Wendell Phillips, for 21 years a selectman and a life-long resident of Tarkiln well-versed in the story of the Tree of Knowledge, preserved for posterity the legend concerning this historic spot. He had printed and bound a four-page booklet which he distributed to his friends and at a banquet for his employees. His description of the demise of the tree:

"There came a great storm in the dead of night when snow and hail, thunder and lightning, accompanied by great gusts of wind, terrified the inhabitants. Just as the clock struck the hour of midnight there came a blinding flash and a tremendous crash which shook the village of Tarkiln. The next morning the Tree of Knowledge which had watched the Mayflower sail into Plymouth harbor was discovered prostrate by the road. And so it continued to lie, forgotten and neglected."

Then, according to the legend, in a scene reminiscent of the haunted dream scene in *Fiddler on the Roof*, one of the older "patriarchs" had a visitation. the spirit of the tree appeared to him, chastising the community for not acknowledging the passing of the oak which in former days had meant so much joy and sorrow for the community. The ghostly apparition threatened plague and disaster if the spot went unmarked, and declared that

the place where it has stood would be forever cursed.

The frightened old man agreed to all the spirit's demands and as quickly as possible told the other villagers his fearful tale. Highly superstitious in those days, the people suspended all work until a sign was hastily put upon the site where the tree had stood.

Since then, except for a brief period of 1923 when the state was working on the road, the site has never gone unmarked, whether to placate the spirit, acknowledge a long-standing tradition or simply to mark an historic spot.

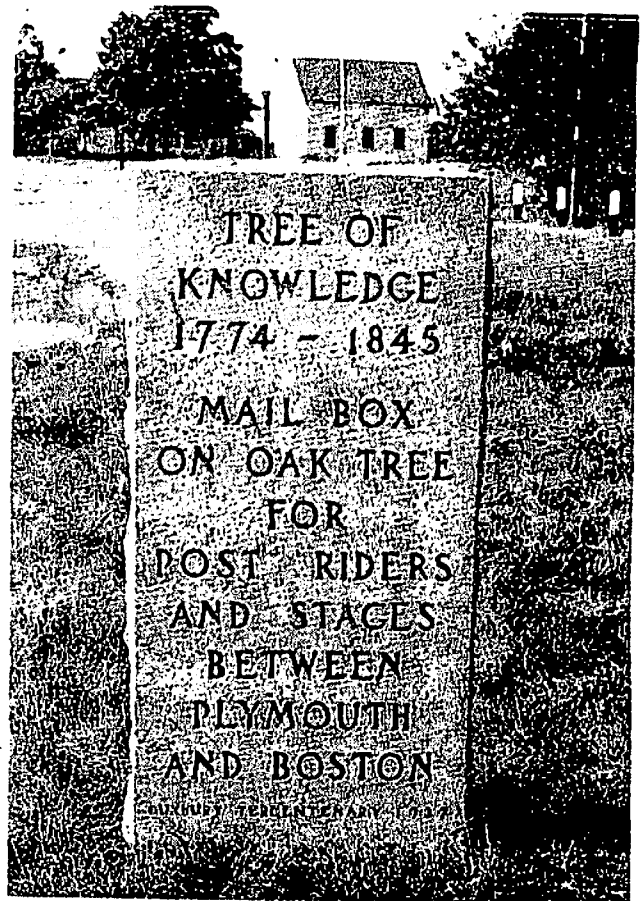
Tarkiln residents, led by Harry Randall, and helped by the Duxbury Rural Society, demanded the return of the sign when it was removed for several months during the roadwork. It was stolen, then recovered, but when Randall started to put it in its place, the state demanded a permit be secured. By the time the permit was received, the site was torn up in order that a road to accommodate more traffic could be constructed. Perhaps the *Boston Herald* article spurred the state to cease obstructing the return of the sign. The power of the press strikes again!

There have been many signs over the years, some brightly painted. Two have been documented as depicting the mounted carrier delivering the mail from Duxbury. Their painter were Mrs. Frederick Knapp of Plymouth and Miss Grace Waterman of Duxbury. The last painted sign, by Mrs. Fanny Clark of South Duxbury, represented the mail coach and four spirited horses starting from the tree.

As Reuben Peterson points out in his 1937 Tercentenary report, the site of the sign is not the exact site of the old oak tree which was west of the road. He

was not unduly disturbed by this relocation, because, in his words, "time has changed completely the old surroundings. There exists no vestige of the old sandy road over which the coach, drawn by four horses, was brought up along side the Tree." He also comments that the state road (the old route 3, eventually to become route 3A) has been straightened and passes to the west of the site of the old tree on the way to Kingston.

I see the spirit of the oak more as a sad apparition asking only to be given its due rather than the avenging grim spectre reported, not one who would activate a curse on a technicality (the wrong spots has been marked.) The memory of the Tree of Knowledge and its place in the lives of a community has been preserved and I'm sure the spirit of the Oak watches benevolently over the people of Tarkiln.



Present granite marker for Tree of Knowledge placed in 1937.